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SUBJECT: NEW EGYPTIAN MINISTER OF HEALTH BRINGS
BUSINESSMAN'S APPROACH TO GOVERNMENT

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ACCORDINGLY.

Introduction/Summary

1. (SBU) In a January 23 meeting with the Ambassador and key country team members in health and science affairs, newly installed Minister of Health and Population Hatem El Gabaly demonstrated that he will be a valuable addition to Egypt's reformer camp. Displaying a "can do," business-like attitude that contrasted starkly with the style of his predecessor, the Minister discussed the GOE's avian influenza (AI) efforts, offered a possible way to exempt U.S. products from Egypt's blanket ban on poultry-related imports, and affirmed that Egypt would have to honor its intellectual property rights (IPR) obligations but also do everything within the law to support Egypt's pharmaceutical industry. See para 6 for biographical information. End introduction/summary.

Cooperation with NAMRU

2. (SBU) Minister El Gabaly expressed strong interest in cooperating with the USG on public health issues, including with the Cairo-based U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit (NAMRU-3). The Ambassador called the Minister's attention to the GOE's AI-related ban on the importation of tissue samples, which are essential to NAMRU's work. The Minister provided the Ambassador with its recently drafted general policy for bringing biological samples into Egypt. El Gabaly said that the conditions listed in the policy were based on the World Health Organization (WHO) and Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines for transporting biological materials across international borders and would apply to all organizations and individuals seeking to import any biological samples. Suggesting that he was interested in having NAMRU-3 resume its testing program, the Minister asked NAMRU to review these conditions and flag any that might prevent it from doing its work. (Note: NAMRU subsequently reviewed the policy, identified only minor concerns with it, and expects to restart importation of tissue samples within days. End note.) El Gabaly also requested that NAMRU-3 inform the Minister or his senior-most staff, on a confidential basis, of positive AI test results of samples

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brought into Egypt.

Avian Influenza

3. (SBU) El Gabaly noted that his ministry maintained daily contact with the WHO and would soon conduct a AI crisis simulation. Moreover, the Minister informed his staff that failure to report any suspected case of AI directly to his office within 30 minutes of detection would result in the negligent official being fired. The Minister said that the GOE was also working closely with the Arab League to develop a fund to compensate farmers whose poultry has to be destroyed to prevent the spread of AI. Drawing on the lessons of Turkey, El Gabaly said the fund would have to compensate farmers for both live poultry and eggs to ensure their full cooperation in AI eradication efforts. El Gabaly said that his ministry was attempting to increase its stock of Tamiflu to 100,000 doses by year's end, but noted that Roche, the U.S. pharmaceutical producer, was unable to meet Egypt's demand, let alone demand for the entire region.

4. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that the GOE's blanket ban on imported poultry products imposed in response to AI concerns had adversely affected U.S. firms. U.S. poultry products, he said, were processed in ways that ensured they were safe, and risk of contamination should not be a concern, as there have

been no AI cases in the United States. Minister El Gabaly replied that his ministry is reviewing the egg powder issue, but more broadly offered to exempt all U.S. products from the ban if they were certified as safe by any internationally recognized food-safety or health organization, including the U.S. FDA. The Ambassador responded that such a certification was unnecessary because WHO guidance clearly indicated which products from which countries were safe. Moreover, he argued that banning everything that is not explicitly approved was exactly the outdated kind of approach that keeps Egypt lagging behind other countries. El Gabaly insisted that he had to take this approach because ministry staff would not necessarily be able to act correctly on the WHO guidance, and because he needed something concrete to defend himself against charges of corruption or incompetence if a pandemic broke out in Egypt.

IPR Protection for Pharmaceuticals

15. (SBU) The Ambassador raised the issue of IPR protection, and specifically the ministry's December approval for a generic copy of Ely Lilly's innovator drug Zyprexa. The Minister was unfamiliar with the Ely Lilly case, saying that he was just beginning to delve into pharmaceutical issues. Noting industry complaints about the ministry's pharmaceutical marketing approval system, El Gabaly stated his intention to fully automate the system to make it more efficient, transparent, and capable of protecting confidential information submitted by applicants. He said he

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would be seeking U.S. assistance for this and other reform efforts in the ministry. Turning to the larger IPR issue, he noted the need to strike a balance between guaranteeing the viability of Egypt's pharmaceutical industry and protecting foreign investors rights. El Gabaly stated several times that Egypt had to honor its IPR obligations, but cautioned that he would protect only what the government was legally obligated to protect. As for Ely Lilly, the Minister promised to revoke the approval for the local generic copy if Lilly wins its appeal.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

16. (SBU) Hatem Mustafa El Gabaly was appointed Minister of Health and Population on December 31 2005. He was born on December 20, 1951, and attended English-language primary and secondary schools in Alexandria and Cairo. El Gabaly received his medical training at Cairo University (B.S. degree in Medicine and Surgery in 1975; M.Sc. in Diagnostic Radiology in 1979; and M.D. in Diagnostic Radiology in 1983), and also trained in London and Paris. Dr. El Gabaly drew on his medical background to establish a number of medical businesses in Egypt, including a 104-branch polyclinic (the largest in the Middle East), the largest private laboratory in Egypt, five private medical practices/centers, and a specialized surgical hospital in collaboration with the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Dr. El Gabaly is a member of the National Democratic Party's health committee. Prior to becoming Minister of Health and Population, he was Managing Director and General Manager of Cairo Radiology Center, Deputy Chairman and Managing Director of 6th of October Hospital for Cardiac, Thoracic, Vascular and Nervous Diseases, and Professor of Diagnostic Radiology at Cairo University Medical School. Dr. El Gabaly speaks excellent English. His operating style is business-like and results-oriented, combined with an air of affability that makes him an easy interlocutor. Like other economic reform ministers in the Nazif cabinet, Dr. El Gabaly seems determined to bring a private-sector sensibility to his ministry's operations. Noting that the Ministry of Health and Population employs some 760,000 people ("enough to populate Benin"), he hopes to start the transformation of the ministry by seeking USAID funding for management training for key members of his 4,000-person staff. Dr. El Gabaly is married and has three children.

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